

Noticeboard

Bulletin of the London Organisational Development Agency for the Black Voluntary Sector



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The role of black consultants in the black voluntary sector.

"We were set up to fail" is a constant complaint that one hears at conferences, seminars and discussions organised by the black voluntary sector. The hopelessness inherent in this kind of talk makes one wonder whether we need the black voluntary sector at all. We desperately need the sector, but must start doing something to take charge and devise strategies that will ensure that no one sets us up to fail; rather we set up ourselves to succeed.

I define the black voluntary sector as black-led not-for-profit organisations delivering services often but not exclusively to other black organisations or users. These are umbrella organisations as well as membership organisations providing: education, employment, welfare and advice, legal, housing, leisure and entertainment, arts and culture, social care and health promotion services. Though there are several mainstream organisations that target black users for their services I do not consider these to be part of the black voluntary sector.

My contention is that intervention of the right sort from black management consultants can help turnaround a sector that is often seen as a poor cousin to the mainstream voluntary sector.

A management consultant is an independent and qualified person who provides management advice to businesses, public, and other sectors including the voluntary sector. Management consultants to be effective must have experience in management as well as the process of delivering services to clients who pay for the services. They must be objective, practical and have sound knowledge of management of organisations and techniques for improving the performance of organisations.

But what are the problems that afflict the sector. Most people in the sector will attribute their problems to inadequate funding for the loads of work that they need to undertake to satisfy their users, but inadequate funding is

but a symptom of the problems that often go deeper.

Some of these problems have been identified as:

- Inappropriate structures
- Lack of management skills
- Lack of skilled workers
- Inability to develop proposals
- Inadequate information about sources of funding
- No long term strategies
- Conflicts between management committee and staff
- Problems with quality assurance
- Lack of evidence about delivery and outputs

Of course, there are also some very good things that are happening within the sector. There is consciousness to deliver the best culturally sensitive services to a client group that has always been short-changed into accepting mediocre services from mainstream organisations.

In all these cases that I have identified black consultants can make a positive contribution to the sector throughout the existence of organisations.

Setting up issues: It is sometimes very crucial to have an independent person talk through your initial ideas for setting up an organisation, the objectives, the type of services that will be provided, the membership, the criteria for inclusion on management committee, and other issues relating to constitution and registration of the organisation.

Funding applications: An experienced consultant can point you in the right direction in terms of where to go for funding and how to structure your funding application to make it attractive to different funding organisations. Issues to do with core funding, project funding, capital funding can be explored with a consultant who may be better able to crystallise your ideas and articulate them in the most appropriate language.

Internal systems: Organisations need

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Attention !!!!

Kenté would like to hear from any black and minority ethnic group working in the area of Mental Health.

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assistance with the setting up of delivery systems that will ensure that the organisation is operating at optimum level. Consultants can assist with the development of financial and administrative systems, employment systems, monitoring and evaluation systems that will make it easier for the smooth functioning of the organisation and lead to attainment of essential quality standards.

Employment: Management consultants can assist in the development of job descriptions and person specifications and selection of staff and volunteers.

Training: Some consultants offer training in different aspects of management for management committee, staff, and volunteers. Typical courses include: roles and responsibilities of management committees, teambuilding, communications and report writing skills, operational management, dealing with contracts, marketing the organisation, quality issues, monitoring and evaluation systems, employing people, financial management and other topics of vital interest to the sector.

Evaluation and reviews: An important role is the evaluation of projects requiring an outside perspective. The consultant can undertake this sort of assignment which funding organisations may require from time to time.

Strategy away day meetings: Away day sessions are a useful way for the organisation to bond and discuss issues away from the hustle and bustle of the organisation and to take a fresh look at the direction and focus of the organisation.

Business plans and concept papers: Consultants can assist in the development of business plans for community based organisations where some original research is required for which the management may not have the skills or the time to accomplish this.

Annual general meeting and report: Again, consultants have a very useful role to play in assisting organisations to pro-

duce annual reports and to organise annual general meetings.

These interventions by management consultants are only possible because of certain qualities that the preferred consultant must have. Management consultants usually have analytical skills that are essential in getting to the bottom of problems. They also play an educational role in terms of helping to provide information to their clients, they communicate new evidence in such a way that the client has to come to the conclusion that the particular course of action is the best after examining all the options. Elucidating and throwing new light on complex issues is another way in which consultants add value.

In selecting which consultant to use, the organisations must look for evidence of experience in the sector and an understanding of issues that are central to black voluntary organisation. Empathy and sensitivity is required as well as expertise in similar projects and service areas.

A long established consultant is preferable to one who is in between jobs or moonlighting on the side.

Accreditation is also very important. The Institute of Management Consultancy is the professional body for management consultants in the UK so an accredited consultant may be preferable to one who is just starting up and has no professional qualifications. For the voluntary sector it is important that the National Council of Voluntary Organisations approves the consultant.

Setting up to fail will soon be a thing of the past for the black voluntary sector if they are able to engage black consultants who know the sector and can bring some independent and refreshing perspective to assist. Mainstream voluntary organisations are increasingly using consultants to assist and it is a good enough reason for the sector to tap into the expertise that will lead them onto the path of sustainable growth.

Ade Sawyerr is a partner of Equinox Consulting, a management consultancy that provides consultancy, training, and research and focuses on the management support needs of the black voluntary sector.